

SHAPED BY
NATURE.

Clark Fork, near Plains, MT



Male Ruffed Grouse

BIRDING **MONTANA'S**
PEAKS, RIVERS AND PLAINS

Where else can you cross the Continental Divide under 10,000' peaks, see nesting trumpeter swans and drive through herds of pronghorn antelope on the high prairie, before lunch?

"I tend to stay in Montana on most of my vacations," says Ron Farmer, of Bozeman. "There is so much birding variety in this state, you could spend a lifetime of vacations and never repeat." Farmer is a banker in Bozeman, and a passionate bird-watcher active in the local Audubon chapter, annual Christmas bird-count, and in leading local birding trips.

"In almost every region of the state," Farmer says, "you can hit alpine terrain, riparian zones, and prairie grasslands, often in the same day. Between migratory arrivals, nesting birds, seasonal habitat, there's always something remarkable taking place."

Look at a state map, and you see what he means. From Beartooth Pass on the Wyoming border, at better than 10,000', to Logan Pass on Going to the Sun Highway in Glacier National Park, and from the Wild and Scenic Missouri River, dotted with the campsites of Lewis and Clark, to the lower Yellowstone River, home to white pelicans and paddlefish, Montana covers the span from high country panoramas to rustling cottonwood groves and sweeping prairie where the curve of the earth is the only thing limiting the horizon. The really exceptional thing is how often these diverse ecosystems nestle up against each other.

1 CENTENNIAL RANGE Take the stretch of rural State Highway 509 between Red Rocks Pass and Monida, in far southwestern Montana, for starters. In a scant 40 miles, the gravel road crests the Continental Divide at 7,120' on the eastern end of the Centennial Range, where you'll see mountain bluebirds, Clark's nutcracker, Steller's jay, and blue grouse on forested slopes. Descend through sage and juniper, with chance glimpses of Lewis' woodpecker and Lapland longspur, to enter the lightly-visited, but world-renowned Red Rocks Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is famous for its population of wintering and resident trumpeter swans, but also supports a healthy population of water fowl, birds of prey, and prairie species. Even a brief stop there reaps a bounty of avocets, willets, green-winged teal,



Great Grey Owl

BEING THERE

PRIME SEASON
May – October. Higher elevations will thaw out by mid-June, while lower elevations open by May. Spring flowers and bird migrations are best early, fall colors peak in September and early October.


CAMPING
Almost all destinations have camping available on site or nearby, from primitive Forest Service campsites to developed hook-ups and mini golf.

NEARBY COMMUNITIES
All highlighted spots have communities within an hour's drive with motels, B&B options, diners, brew pubs and coffee shops. Smaller towns may not offer a range of services, but often feature home-cooking cafés.

LOCAL TIPS
*- Bring the fly rod – almost everywhere has world-class fishing.
- Keep an eye out for local rodeos, art festivals, and historic museums.
- Check VISITMT.COM for seasonal birding events.*

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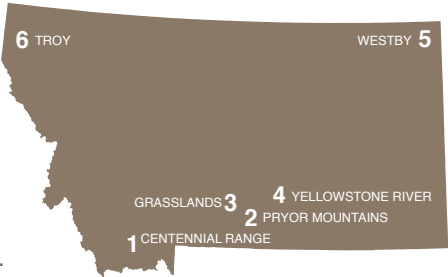
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sora, sandpipers, great-grey owls and great-blue herons. Continue west, towards Monida, where golden eagle, Swainson's hawks and prairie falcon roost on fenceposts or soar overhead. The snow-clad Centennial Range rises to the south, and pronghorn dot the sagebrush prairie, which teems with western meadowlark, horned lark, burrowing owls and sage grouse.

3 GRASSLANDS “One of my favorite grassland drives is through the country near Rapelje,” Farmer says. From Columbus, take Highway 306 north to the small community of Rapelje. There, the road turns to gravel and you can head west towards Big Timber or continue north on Big Coulee Road through aptly-named, Golden Valley County, to Ryegate. A detour



2 PRYOR MOUNTAINS Or again, farther east in the state, try a 50-mile round trip into the Pryor Mountains from the small community of Bridger, a drive that packs in an amazing spectrum of ecosystems and species. Follow the gravel road trending southeast from the outskirts of Bridger into Custer National Forest and the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range. Starting in badland topography, the road climbs along Sage Creek into forests and mountains. Keep the binos handy for glimpses of wild horses, as well as for long-eared owls, gray flycatchers, yellow-breasted chat, brown creeper, and red-naped sapsucker. The cool, wooded recesses of Sage Creek Canyon contrast with high-open slopes above 7,000'. Break up the birding with a stop at the ice caves and continue to the dramatic overlook near East Pryor Mountain (8,786') with views over the Bighorn River valley. Either return to Bridger, or turn south a few miles west of the Forest Service campground, and connect with Highway 310 near Warren, completing the tour. It may only be 50 miles, but take a day to savor it all.



to nearby Halfbreed National Wildlife Refuge and Hailstone Wildlife Refuge will add waterfowl and shorebirds to the list, but prairie species are the highlight, including chestnut-collared longspur, McCown's longspur, ferruginous hawks, lark bunting, golden eagles, short-eared owls and long-billed curlew. You might get really lucky and spot a mountain plover.

4 YELLOWSTONE RIVER Along the lower Yellowstone River, which people tend to zoom past on the interstate, Farmer suggests pulling off at the frequent fishing access points. “There are fishing access sites and state parks every few highway exits. They have good parking, groves of trees and very few people. I like to break up the drive and walk the river banks.” The Yellowstone River rewards birders with white pelicans, hooded mergansers, cormorants, osprey, great-blue herons and bald eagles. The Yellowstone corridor is rife with historical points of interest as well as avian highlights. Stop in at Pompeys Pillar National Monument, where Captain Clark carved his name in the sandstone on his way down the river in July of 1806. And pay attention to the ground, because the distinctive moss-agates the Yellowstone River is famous for litter the gravel bars.


5 & 6 THE HIGHLINE If it's the birding checklist you're after, go to the borderland extremes of the state. At the far northeastern limit, the salt lakes near Westby, Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge and the Westby City Park will deliver a dozen or more species of spring warbler and sparrow migrants, some found nowhere else in the state, while the ponds and wetlands will check off piping plover, white-fronted geese and tundra swans. At the western extreme, hundreds of miles away along Highway 2, visit Troy. There, along the Kootenai River, find several boreal species not seen elsewhere in Montana, including chestnut-backed chickadees, boreal owl, and varied thrush.

Like Farmer says, you can spend a lifetime of vacations in Montana, probing the peaks, rivers and prairie, and never have to hit the same place twice.

For more information on birding in Montana, go to VISITMT.COM or call 1-800-VISIT-MT, ext. 1131 and ask for your Montana birding packet.

Written by Alan Kesselheim. Alan is a freelance writer who lives with his wife and three children in Bozeman. He has published nine books and hundreds of magazine stories.

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